

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 23 October 2011

No. T0699

Speaker: Mr. Anthony Brett

A Study of Galatians: Preserving the Truth of the Gospel - Galatians 2:1-21

In continuing our study of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians who lived in a region of Asia Minor we have arrived at Galatians 2. We have already noticed the very forceful language that Paul uses in Galatians. Galatians 2 is no different in this respect. He had used phrases like "turning away" from Christ (Galatians 1:6), "perverting the Gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6), and called for those who had introduced false teaching to be "accursed" (Galatians 1:8-9). This is really strong language for a servant of the Lord Jesus to use, so the issues he is writing about must be very serious.

When Paul was writing to the believers at Corinth, he had to deal with matters of immorality (1 Corinthians 5) and with divisions within the assembly (1 Corinthians 3), but there his language is more moderate. The errors were obvious, even unbelievers would have counted some of the practices as utterly immoral. Here in Galatians the errors are much more subtle, and more dangerous, so Paul's language is more robust.

Galatians 2 divides into two quite neatly:

- Galatians 2:1-10 deal with Paul returning to Jerusalem for the second time following his conversion; and
- Galatians 2:11-21 deal with Peter's visit to Antioch.

Paul returning to Jerusalem for the second time following his conversion

Let's read Galatians 2:1-10, "Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain. Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. But from those who seemed to be something - whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favouritism to no man - for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me. But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do." Galatians 2:1-10.

Paul was at great pains in Galatians 1 to emphasise that his commission as an apostle of Jesus Christ owed nothing whatsoever to man or the will of man (Galatians 1:3). It was a commission he had received directly from Jesus Christ and God the Father. He hadn't needed to have it confirmed by man nor had he consulted with the other apostles to any great extent. Indeed, after his initial meeting with the disciples at Jerusalem following his Damascus road experience and conversion, he had in fact returned to Damascus. Not now to persecute the Christians there, but to preach the faith he had previously so violently resisted (Acts 9:1-30). In Galatians 1 we learnt that three years had passed before Paul had returned to Jerusalem and there he had met with the Apostle Peter, staying with him for just over two weeks (Galatians 1:18).

A further fourteen years passed before Paul again returned to Jerusalem with Barnabas and taking his young friend, Titus, with him (Galatians 2:1). If we had just the record of Acts, we would not realise that so many years had passed.

Paul wrote that "I went up [to Jerusalem] by, or because of, revelation" (Galatians 2:2). I assume this meant that he received specific guidance or instruction from God the Holy Spirit to do so. When there, he met privately with some of the leading disciples and communicated to them the character of the Gospel that he had been preaching among the Gentiles. Paul was concerned that he wasn't "running in vain" or that he had in the past "run in vain" (Galatians 2:2). Paul was a passionate person and never did anything in a half-hearted manner. He wanted to make sure that what he

had been preaching for the past seventeen years was consistent with what the Christians in Jerusalem who served mainly among the Jewish nation, were preaching.

In some ways this seems slightly strange. Paul had gone to great lengths to demonstrate that God's Gospel or Good News was not influenced in any way by the ideas of man. Why should he now after all these years check up with the Christians at Jerusalem? I'm not sure, but he had been divinely instructed to go to Jerusalem and was obedient. Happily when there, the apostles were glad to see him with Barnabas and their young friend, Titus, and shared his joy at the reception that the Gentiles gave to the Gospel. Certainly Paul was concerned that what he had received by direct revelation from God, he had not misinterpreted or applied wrongly.

Paul immediately starts to deal with the issues that had led him to write this letter. Titus, the Gentile man who travelled with him, had not been circumcised. (Galatians 2:3) The Jewish Christians had not asked that he should be, nor had he needed to be. They had enjoyed fellowship together as Christians, saved by the same Gospel and united together by the same Holy Spirit. Circumcision, the distinct mark of every Jewish male as previously required by God was now no longer a requirement. It was a mark in their flesh of the divine law that they had placed themselves under. This favoured and privileged nation had singularly failed to keep God's law, and so would we all have failed. Our flesh is incapable of pleasing God in any way whatsoever.

To look back to the early days of the Christian church all misty eyed, and think that all was wonderful and free from problems and dissension is clearly wrong. Satan had wasted no time at all in opposing God's work. Sometimes he used physical oppression and persecution but often with much more success by introducing through false teachers, errors that undermined the truth of the Gospel. If this was possible even under the watchful eye of the apostles, how much more are we at risk today!

It would appear that there were those in the Christian company at Jerusalem who shouldn't have been there. In Galatians 2:4 Paul speaks of "false brethren" brought in "secretly" and "by stealth". They had no right to be there, but not only were they in the company of the true believers, they were introducing elements of the Jewish religion, like circumcision, as an addition to the "truth of the Gospel" Galatians 2:5. Paul realised immediately that this was a genuine and dangerous threat to the Gospel of the grace of God that he and the other apostles were preaching.

To add anything to the Gospel, any requirement for me to fulfil doesn't reinforce, or bolster the truth of the Gospel. On the contrary, it totally undermines it! Paul, addressing the Christians at Ephesus writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" Ephesians 2:8-9. For hundreds of years the Jews had been trying to please God by keeping His law, they had failed miserably! Why in the world would we believe that having been saved by trusting entirely on the finished work of Jesus Christ, we could strengthen or add to our Christian faith by re-introducing something that God had set aside because of man's complete inability to keep it?

This is an argument that Paul develops in Galatians 2:11-21

Peter's visit to Antioch

"Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, 'If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.'" Galatians 2:11-21.

In Galatians 2:11-12, Paul recounts an incident that occurred between himself and a fellow Apostle, Peter. Previously Peter had been instrumental, through the direction of God the Holy Spirit, in first preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. He had willingly obeyed God's direction to go to Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and share with Cornelius and his household the marvel of God's grace in Christ Jesus towards us (Acts 10:1-48). This was a most remarkable act for Peter. His religion had taught him that he was one of God's favoured nation, and the Jews would not mix with non-Jews, or as they are called, Gentiles. Cornelius was not only a Gentile but a Roman, the nation that at that very time

occupied and oppressed the land of Israel. Peter had been obedient to God's instructions, had preached the Gospel to Cornelius and when Cornelius had received the Good News in faith, Peter was glad to baptise him.

However, when some fellow Jews came to Antioch from Jerusalem Peter separated from the Gentile Christians and would not eat with them (Galatians 2:12). Paul doesn't beat around the bush with Peter. He opposed him face to face (Galatians 2:11), using words like "hypocrite" and "hypocrisy". Paul realised the seriousness of what was happening. I might have been inclined to keep quiet so as not to cause an unpleasant atmosphere, not Paul! Peter's action had been public and had caused others to follow him in this act of hypocrisy, even Barnabas had been carried along with it. Paul's action was also public: "I said to Peter before them all" Galatians 2:14. He didn't talk about Peter to the others as I am inclined to do; no, Paul talked **to** Peter before the others.

It would normally be appropriate to discuss a problem with a fellow believer in private, but Peter's action had been very public and had caused others to stumble, so Paul confronts him publicly. But it wasn't just the hypocrisy of Peter's action that worried Paul; it was what lay behind the action. To be two-faced is no way for a Christian to behave, but these false teachers were undermining the very foundation of Christianity.

It had been clearly demonstrated over the centuries that we couldn't keep God's holy law. We have been justified in God's sight, cleared of all guilt and offence before God, not through keeping the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. As it is written in Galatians 2:16, "a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."

So what was so dangerous about adding an old Jewish custom to Christianity? After all it was an ordinance that God Himself had insisted upon, a mark in the flesh of every Jewish male acknowledging that they had pledged themselves to keep God's law. Peter had clearly acknowledged by his previous actions that he recognised that God no longer sought to bless people by law-keeping. God had provided a far greater remedy in the gift of His own Son Jesus Christ. There was a freedom in this that could never be enjoyed under the law. Justification was complete, total, based upon a righteous sacrifice and not upon any inadequate attempts to please God by what I could or could not do.

To go back from this, as Peter appeared to be doing, was to deny the very foundation on which salvation had been received. Either the Lord's work had been the only sufficient means of salvation, or it hadn't. Either Peter had enjoyed peace with God through this Gospel or he hadn't. To suggest, as Peter's action inferred, that it was necessary for the Gentiles to live as Jews to receive blessing is to totally discredit the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. How can it be possible that we stand before God in all the virtue of Christ's work and yet we still need something in the way of keeping the old law to make our justification or salvation complete? It is, in effect, to make Christ a minister of sin rather than a minister of justification. It is an outrageous thought and Paul immediately dismisses it.

No, the fault lay with Peter. If he was returning to the law, he was, as it says in Galatians 2:18, rebuilding "those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor". In the house of Cornelius, Peter had happily shared the Gospel of God's grace with the Gentiles, acknowledging that what God had cleansed he, Peter, could not call unclean. Now Peter had separated from the Gentiles again when the Christian Jews had come to Antioch. He can't be right on both occasions! If he was right mixing with the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius he was wrong to separate from them now. If he was right to separate from them now, he should never have gone to the house of a Gentile in the past. Peter, you can't have it both ways!

Paul now goes on to press home the true blessing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "For I through the law died to the law" Galatians 2:19. Paul didn't deny the force of God's law, rather he acknowledged its full condemnation and judgement. "I am crucified with Christ". He saw in Christ's death his own and so he was no longer subject to the law. The law has nothing to say to a dead man! Instead Paul had new life in Christ. "It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me; and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me" Galatians 2:20. So Paul could now "live to God" Galatians 2:19. Paul would now have God before him as the reason or the object or sole purpose for living.

This is so much grander than striving each day to please God by what I do by way of keeping His law. Do I try and find peace through my feeble efforts, do I strive to attain to a standard of holiness that is completely beyond even the best of us? Or do I rest quietly on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God's own dear Son at Calvary, an offering that satisfied, or rather, glorified God and answered completely every claim of His holy throne?

We cannot have it both ways. We either trust to our ability to keep the law or we rest in the grace of God which has provided a remedy for our lost condition. In Galatians 2:21, Paul states the stark fact that if it had been possible to obtain righteousness through keeping the law, then Jesus Christ had died pointlessly.

The history of the previous centuries had demonstrated that righteousness could never be obtained in this way, "There is none righteous, no, not one" Romans 3:10. Paul was content to trust absolutely to the finished work of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, and so should we. If we think for one moment that we can, or need to, add to Christ's work, we do Him great dishonour and discredit His work.

It is important to notice that even though Paul had to stand up to Peter in this very public and strong way, Peter didn't go off in a huff and hold a grudge against Paul for the rest of his life. He was a very changed man from the Peter we see in the four Gospels. It would appear that he accepted the rebuke from Paul and repented of his error, because later in other Scriptures as Peter nears the end of his life, he speaks with great affection of his "beloved brother Paul" 2 Peter 3:15. This is a lesson I too need to learn! If I am wrong and someone graciously points this out to me, I should accept the rebuke and value and love the one who corrected me.

Let us in our day, then, take to heart the lessons of this important chapter. My salvation has been eternally secured by the work of the Lord Jesus at Calvary. That work is sufficient in itself. There is absolutely nothing I can do to add to it. But I need to live in the good of it - "by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me". (Galatians 2:20)

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.